

“The Gloria”
Luke 2:1-20
December 25, 2011

INTRODUCTION:

We looked last week at the first of Luke’s four Christmas hymns, Mary’s *Magnificat*. We want to turn today to the third of these hymns, and the shortest, the *Gloria* of the angelic choir. It consists of only two lines, and these two lines are a familiar part of our celebration of Christmas. **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”** This is the only time I can think of in the Bible where we are presented with a description of heaven’s worship that doesn’t occur in a vision. The book of Revelation, of course, features many such descriptions of the worship of heaven, but all of that is seen not in reality but in a vision John the apostle had while in exile on the isle of Patmos. The apostle Paul talks about going to heaven once, but he said he was unaware of whether it was in the body or through a vision. In any case, he doesn’t describe it to us, but only says that he saw things that man is not permitted to utter (2 Cor. 12:4). But in this passage we have the unique situation of a group of people seeing into heaven and being permitted to talk about it.

This unique situation came about in a most unlikely way. A group of shepherds were doing what they had to do every single night, guard the sheep, when they received a visitor who scared them to death. They were accustomed to watching for night predators and always had to keep an eye out for such. But they did not expect to receive an angelic visitor. The angel uttered the customary words of reassurance, “Fear not,” because the glory of the Lord came with the angel. This glory is a normal part of heaven, but sinful humanity is unaccustomed to it, and it always leads to great fear. The angel then said what he came to say, that a special baby had just been born in Bethlehem, none other than God’s anointed one who would bring salvation. They would find him wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. The text never says explicitly that Jesus was born in a stable, but it is a safe inference to make from the fact that this was his first bed.

It is at this point that the angelic choir is heard. While the text doesn’t say this explicitly, I am left with the impression that their hymn comes forth something like the proud parents of the new baby who get on the phone as soon as possible to announce the birth to as many people as they can think of. One commentator said that it was customary in this culture that when a boy was born, the local musicians would gather at the house to welcome this new life with their songs. Because of the circumstances of his birth, Jesus lacked such a choir, but the angels more than made up for it. As we look at this passage, I would like for us to ask again the question we asked last week. Are

you hearing the music of the gospel in your life? To help us do so, let's consider three different aspects of this angelic hymn.

I. The Hymn's Audience

It was the shepherds who heard this hymn, and they did so at night. Let's consider both of those facts as we look at this more carefully. Shepherds are notable for their plainness. They are simply the everyday people, similar in their culture to what we would call today the lower middle class. Though they would have been quite poor by our standards, in their own culture they were simply members of the common working class that no one paid much attention to. Yet it was this group of common folk who were privileged to hear the angels sing.

The appearance of the angels to common shepherds is consistent with the other details of the birth of Jesus. I notice that Luke mentions three times in this account that Jesus was laid in a manger, which was something of a feeding trough for animals. There is a two-fold significance of that fact. First, it means, as we pointed out earlier, that Jesus was likely born in a stable, for the simple reason that such an item would normally be found in a stable. The stable was either an addition to a home, or more commonly a cave. The early church father, Justin Martyr, writing around 150 A.D., states that this "stable" was a cave. The fact of the manger serves secondly to emphasize the plainness and weakness of Jesus' entry to the earth. A modern equivalent to the manger would be a cardboard box. If you hear of parents who put their baby to sleep in a cardboard box, it tells you that they are poor and couldn't afford to outfit a nursery at "Buy Buy Baby". The angels appeared to shepherds because such an appearance is consistent with the central message of the gospel. Jesus came not for those who have achieved some remarkable feat, but for those who are desperate enough to know they simply need to receive.

I notice also that the angelic choir came at night. Imagine yourself in their situation. Apparently sheep need watching at night. There are night predators about, and shepherds can't just go to sleep. But beyond watching, they can't do much else. They would have been too poor to burn the oil in lamps. So there is an enforced idleness, but one in which you can't sleep. I don't think it's insignificant that the glory of heaven opened to them not while they were busy, but when they were at rest. When our lives are filled with the noise of busyness, we simply won't hear the music of the gospel. I read recently that the written word for busyness in Chinese consists of the two pictures for heart and murder. When we are busy, we murder our own hearts.

II. The Hymn's Message

The hymn has a simple two part message that provides the angelic interpretation of the birth of Jesus. It means glory to God and peace to men. You may have noticed the different wording in our text as compared to the traditional wording. The traditional wording says, "Peace on earth, good will to men." I think our translation is the better one in its reading, "on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" According to the commentators, the phrase "those with whom he is pleased" is "almost a technical phrase in first-century Judaism for God's elect." The order is important. First is glory to God and second is peace to mankind. No ultimate peace is possible in a world where the glory of God is not the most important thing.

What does it mean when the angels sing, "Glory to God in the highest"? Because of the parallelism of the lines, the "highest" is parallel to the earth, and so refers to heaven. This is the opposite of our saying about someone being a big fish in a little pond. God is a big fish in the biggest and most glorious place possible, heaven itself. The way to have peace in this world is to know what a really big God we have.

In C. S. Lewis' *Prince Caspian*, of the Narnia Chronicles, the children find themselves back in Narnia after a long absence. But they are troubled because they don't see Aslan, the great king and lion, and a picture of Christ. Lucy, the youngest of the children, particularly wants to see him. One night she awakens to a voice calling her into the woods, where she finds a clearing. Here's what happens:

A circle of grass, smooth as a lawn, met her eyes, with dark trees dancing all round it. And then—oh joy! For *he* was there: the huge Lion, shining white in the moonlight, with his huge black shadow underneath him.

But for the movement of his tail he might have been a stone lion, but Lucy never thought of that. She never stopped to think whether he was a friendly lion or not. She rushed to him. She felt her heart would burst if she lost a moment. And the next thing she knew was that she was kissing him and putting her arms as far round his neck as she could and burying her face in the beautiful rich silkiness of his mane.

"Aslan, Aslan. Dear Aslan," sobbed Lucy. "At last."

The great beast rolled over on his side so that Lucy fell, half sitting and half lying between his front paws. He bent forward and just touched her nose with his tongue. His warm breath came all round her. She gazed up into the large wise face.

"Welcome, child," he said.

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."

"That is because you are older, little one," answered he.

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."

We will hear the music of the gospel and find the peace of God as God becomes bigger and greater to us. We can see something of his bigness in our

passage in what theologians call the sovereignty of God. We receive God's peace as we trust his sovereign control over our lives. God accomplishes his purpose of Jesus' birth taking place in Bethlehem through the decree of Caesar Augustus. According to Micah 5:1-2, the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. But Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth of Galilee, about eighty miles north of Bethlehem. The decree of Caesar required that all citizens travel to their home for registration, for the purpose of accurate tax collection. Government edicts such as this often have unintended consequences, and these often are visited upon those with the least power and influence. So Joseph and Mary were forced in the latter stages of her pregnancy to make this long trip. They had no control, but there is peace for those with no control when they trust in the sovereignty of God.

Let me point out a couple of things about this peace that comes from trusting God's sovereign control. First, it is a present-oriented peace, not something that must await some fulfillment in a distant future. Have you noticed how we often miss the joys of the present because of anxiety about the future? Parents can be focused so much on the next stage in a child's growth that they miss the joys of the present. Because of the sovereignty of God, the present is filled with meaning, and we have peace when we come to trust in that. Near the end of his life, Henri Nouwen said it like this: "My whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered the interruptions were my work."

The second thing I want to point out about this peace is that it delivers us from anger to worship. When you don't trust the sovereign control of a good God, you will respond to difficulties in life with anger, either at God or at others. Mary and Joseph could have responded in anger directed at Caesar, but it would only have served to make their own lives miserable. But those who trust in a sovereign God in control of all things for our benefit can respond with a heart of peace, joy and worship.

Only God can bring this kind of peace. Some commentators have suggested that Luke intends a contrast between Jesus and Caesar. They point out that Luke's readers would have understood that the word 'savior', though referring to Jesus in verse 11, was a "standard title applied to imperial rulers, and particularly to Augustus" (Stephen Holmes). Augustus was widely credited with ending a long period of warfare and bringing about widespread peace known as the *Pax Romana*. Luke is saying here that Jesus is the true King able to bring about such a peace.

III. The Hymn's Fulfillment

After hearing the announcement of the angels, the shepherds decide to go and see the birth they had heard about. Bethlehem was not a large place, and

shepherds probably would have known of all the caves serving as stables. They quickly find the one with a baby in it, and there is Jesus just as the angel had said, together with his parents, Mary and Joseph. Two things happen with the shepherds. First, they begin to testify about Jesus. **“They made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them”** (v. 17-18). The shepherds become, in the words of someone I read this week, “midwives of another world.” Midwives guide expectant mothers through the labor and delivery difficulties of bringing children into this world. The shepherds here point others to the one who can give them new birth into another world.

The second result of the birth of Jesus in the lives of the shepherds is worship and joy. What began with just another boring night watching the sheep, and was then interrupted by the terror of an angelic visitor, now ends with the shepherds **“glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen”** (v. 20). They point the way to us all, showing us that it is when we come to Jesus that we find joy and peace. He is the end of fear, of restlessness and of despair.

I understand that there is an exercise some pilots undergo late in their training. While airborne, the instructor places a bag over the student pilot’s head, rendering him blind. The instructor then takes the controls and does all kinds of stunts. He does a loop to loop, tailspins and nose dives. He concludes by putting the plane in a nose dive and then taking the bag off the student pilot’s head and turning the controls over to him. He must then get the plane back under control. This exercise is called “Recovering from an Unusual Attitude.” There is a sense in which we are all at a place where we need to recover from an unusual attitude. The way to do so is to go and find Jesus. He is the only source of all joy and peace.

CONCLUSION:

Mary also points the way forward for us. **“Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart”** (v. 19). In a way, our position is more like that of Mary than the shepherds. She didn’t hear the angels, and neither have we. She heard the testimony of the shepherds just like we have. What she saw with her eyes was just a baby lying in the feeding trough for an animal. We need to do what she did, mull over these things in our mind, and come to see that Jesus really is the one who alone can bring peace and joy to us.